

## The St. Mary's Ghost

ISSN 0003-4827

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### Recommended Citation

"The St. Mary's Ghost." *The Annals of Iowa* 37 (1965), 610-614.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.7737>

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the causes of this void. The preoccupation with the future on the Middle Border was probably the major reason for its neglect of the past.

Although there were marked differences in the early culture of farms and small towns in the rural Midwest, both areas shared certain characteristics which have stimulated an antipathy to history. In general the attitude of this region toward history can only be characterized as ahistorical, or possibly anti-historical. The restlessness of early settlers and the changing world in which the towns developed have inhibited the sense of stability and permanence which is conducive to historical respect. The confident optimism in the future and the influence of traditional modes of thought united in a creed to which nearly everyone subscribed. In fact, boosterism was probably the major tradition of most small towns in the rural Midwest. Unlike many other traditions, however, boosterism by its very nature contributed little to an acute cognizance of history. There was little time or opportunity to pay much heed to the past. The future has always been the focus of attention in small towns, and history has suffered as a result.

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### **The St. Mary's Ghost**

Flying saucers? Nonsense! In 1947, when flying saucer reports were appearing in the headlines frequently, a staff writer for the Des Moines *Register* made a trip to St. Mary's, Iowa, in Warren county, to interview citizens on the subject. The consensus was that people's imaginations had just been working overtime dreaming up the shiny flying discs.

But, in their opinion, their own local "spook-light" ghost was another matter. Though local people might not have seen saucers, some of them certainly had seen the light. It hadn't been appearing as often as formerly, but some of the younger people insisted they had seen it recently—something

residents of St. Mary's had been saying since 1874 or thereabouts.

In 1938, local people told reporter Russ Wilson of the *Des Moines Tribune* that the light had first appeared after a home on a 160-acre farm a half mile south of town burned. The fire claimed the life of a young girl, they said, but people were uncertain as to the date, saying only that it had been a long time ago.

By 1947, the stories had become two in number and at least some local people set the date of the light's first appearance as 1874. One version of the story said that a Mrs. Wallace was burned to death in a nearby farmhouse that year. Another story said that the light first appeared after a young girl died violently.

There was no doubt as to the best place to look for the ghost-light. Its whereabouts had become so well known that people were coming from out of town to look for it. In 1946 a young farmer, Bill Brentano, told a *Tribune* reporter that he wished people would stop coming to his place to see the ghost. During the years of World War II, he said, when gasoline was rationed and people used automobiles sparingly, very few people came to see the haunted farm. But once the war was over and gasoline rationing lifted, ghost seekers, many of them from Des Moines, had become a problem; they trampled shrubbery, uprooted a tree, stole chickens, and infringed on his privacy. He had even called the sheriff several times to disperse them. This must have been particularly annoying to him since, Brentano told the reporter, he himself had never seen the ghost-light, knew nobody who had, and was a firm disbeliever.

Not so of everyone in town, however. In 1938 Russ Wilson had no trouble at all finding people who had seen the light. They described it as being about 15 or 20 inches in diameter, brilliant red in the center, shading to orange at the edge. Later it was described as having "rays of brilliant light" flashing from the edges. Sometimes it was said to bounce down a lane, other times it would hang motionless; there were stories that it pursued people. In 1947 Roy Whitehead of Indianola, then 60 years of age, said he had not only seen

the eerie light but also had heard its voice; "the voice of a lost earthbound soul."

In 1938 Harry Berning, a farmer south of St. Mary's, was quoted as saying, "I don't know just how many times I've seen it, but it's been a lot. It will sort of float along over the edge of the field, and now and then shoot up into the air. We don't pay much attention to it around here any more."

C. A. McNair, operator of the general store and cafe in St. Mary's, recalled an incident which probably occurred in the early 1930's: "I was driving an old model T . . . . Somewhere along the road near the south end of the Storz farm I glanced out of the car. I saw a light that I believe was The One. I sure stepped on the gas. I'll bet that old car never traveled as fast before."

Orval Berning, a farmer, said in 1938 that he had seen the light several times, once a little too close for comfort:

"It was on a winter night a few years ago. I'd been up here at the store playing cards with some of the boys.

"I started walking home about 1:30 in the morning. At that time we lived about three-quarters of a mile east of the Storz place [the farm on which the house was said to have burned].

"I'd turned at the crossroads and was going past the Storz place when, all of a sudden, there It was. Just inside the fence. I don't suppose It was more than 25 feet away from me. It was floating along, slowly.

"There was no moon that night, and there was no one in the field with a lantern.

"I didn't stay around there very long, though."

Berning also remembered seeing the light from a window overlooking the Storz place, and reported that he had, on many a night, seen the light "flitting about the Storz farm until an early hour . . . ." and occasionally soaring skyward until it was higher than the trees. People interviewed by reporters all agreed that the light didn't leave the Storz place except that occasionally it would drift out to the road running past the farm.

The light had been seen by people of all ages. Harold Kleyman, then a senior in high school, said in 1938 that he

had heard of the ghost-light when he first came to St. Mary's about thirteen years before, and had seen it every year since then, quite often. "Several people have tried to figure it out," he told a reporter, "and there were some scientists out here a few years back, but no one's been able to find the answer. And the light's still there but it doesn't seem as active as it used to be." This latter statement concerning its activity was confirmed by Orval Berning; the light's appearances were becoming less frequent, though people were still, at that time, seeing it fairly often.

One story often told concerning the light was the adventure of Noble Nixon who, sometime during the early 1930's, was riding home on horseback. As he passed the area where the light was often seen, it appeared suddenly in the road behind him and "took out after him." According to the story, Nixon ran the horse all the way home and "couldn't do a thing with it for a week afterwards."

Bill Lippold, a trucker, told how a group had once tried to corner the light. It was Halloween, appropriately enough, and they had been out in the country when they saw the light. They tried to chase it but couldn't get closer than a quarter of a mile.

In still another story current in St. Mary's during the late 1930's, a Des Moines youth was said to have pursued the light so fast that he was able to make a grab for it, an experience which left him so unnerved he wasn't able to work the next day.

The farm on which the light appeared—in 1938 the Storz place, by 1946 farmed by Bill Brentano—was a little over a half mile south of the town of St. Mary's, the southeastern corner of a county road intersection. The light was seen most often, according to local people, in a narrow strip of this farm adjoining the roads on the south edge of the east-west road, and the east edge of the north-south road. But Bill Brentano, living in the house not too far east of the area most favored by the ghost-light, claimed not to have seen it.

When a reporter discussed the ghost-light with Charles D Reed of Des Moines, a meteorologist, he was told that in Reed's opinion the St. Mary's ghost was probably "purely

imaginative—a tale that gets abroad.” The only possible scientific explanations he could offer were that the ball of fire might be ball lightning, which would appear during storms but not during fair weather, as the ghost-light was said to have done at least part of the time; or it might be the burning of swamp gas, which would give a will-o’-the-wisp effect but would remain stationary; Reed added that he had never heard of this phenomenon in Iowa.

And there the matter has rested. The St. Mary’s ghost either has ceased its nocturnal prowling, or has ceased to cause enough comment to excite the imagination of news reporters. After the stories told to a reporter in 1947, there have been no more.

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### Museum Notes

February 7, 1965, marked the special opening of the Iowa Heritage Art Exhibit, featuring eighty works by William J. Wagner, Iowa artist and architect. Mr. Wagner’s watercolors and pen and ink drawings presented a remarkable panorama of Iowa’s historic sites—homes, churches, towns and monuments—to the delight of the hundreds of visitors who viewed this fascinating and memorable display. The exhibit was sponsored by the Iowa Society for the Preservation of Historic Landmarks and the Iowa Department of History and Archives.

Also on display for a limited time were several original Abraham Lincoln letters recently found in the Hon. John A. Kasson Collection. Accompanying these were Lincoln letters from other collections, including the President’s second inaugural address.

Another fine exhibit at the museum features glassware from the Keota and Iowa City glassworks.

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